



At the Oakland Museum, hundreds of visitors offered comments on community-generated displays about the 1960s.

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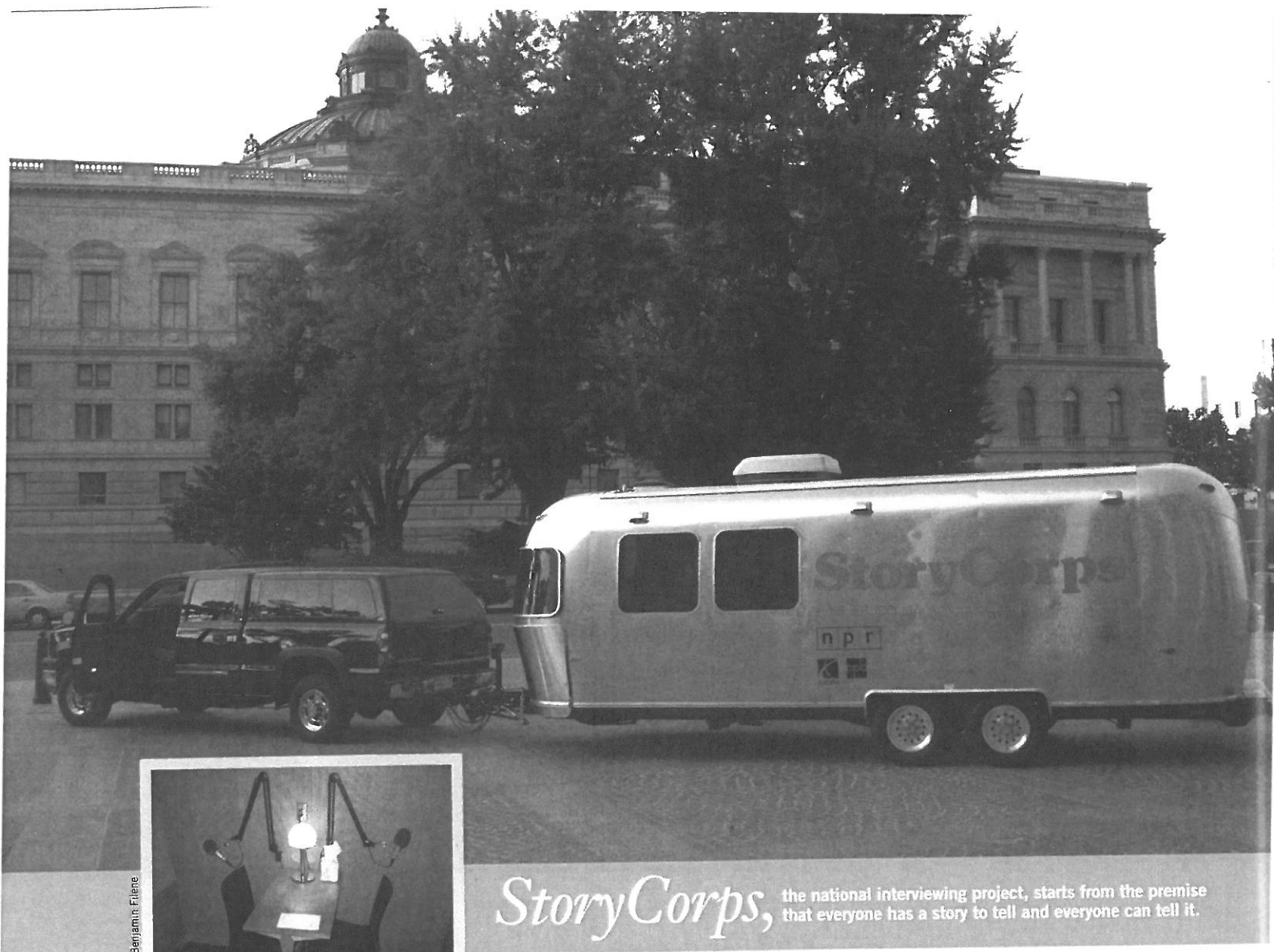
# Letting Go?

## Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World

By Benjamin Filene

The traditional expertise of the history museum seems to be challenged at every turn. Web 2.0 invites ordinary people to become their own archivists, curators, historians, and designers as they organize images on Snapfish, identify artifacts through Flickr, post text on wikis, and create websites with WordPress and Weebly. Bricks-and-mortar museums, meanwhile, in pursuit of civic engagement, give community members more say

in what stories the museum showcases and how they get told. Exhibitions frequently shun the authoritative voice. Two decades after historian Michael Frisch heralded oral history for enabling shared authority, museums feature first-person voices with less and less narrative mediation. Contemporary artists, too, question the institutional authority of museums—sometimes lamenting, sometimes lampooning the illusion of objective curatorial interpretation.



Benjamin Filene



*StoryCorps*, the national interviewing project, starts from the premise that everyone has a story to tell and everyone can tell it.

As people have more avenues to shape, not just consume, content, are museums heading toward a fundamentally different relationship to their constituencies—one in which the lines between expert and audience are blurred? Is visitor-generated content a fad or a fundamental shift in how museums operate? Are we living through a sea change, in other words, or just a summer shower?

To explore these questions, The Pew Center for Arts and Heritage assembled a group of scholars and practitioners—exhibit developers, museum directors, oral historians, collections curators, folklorists, artists—and invited them to reflect on the shifting state of historical authority in museums. The result was *Letting Go? Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*, an eclectic collection of essays, interviews, and case studies, published in fall 2011, that charts change but also points to a surprising degree of continuity. Together, the pieces show that the impulse to let visitors interpret the past is generating a host of pathbreaking work; but they also show that this idea of relaxing our grip on historical authority has

deeper historical roots in our field than we might think and, importantly, that “letting go” requires *more* involvement, not less, from museum professionals.

### Varieties of Letting Go

Initiatives to encourage audience participation are cropping up all over, but one can chart dynamic change in four key areas: the Web, oral history, community-based programming, and contemporary art. The easiest to see, perhaps, is the newest. The Internet has opened up channels of communication and diffused lines of authority in every aspect of society, and history is no exception. Just as Wikipedia invites the whole world to describe the whole world, several projects let anyone anywhere chronicle the past personally and directly. The online mapping project *City of Memory* ([www.cityofmemory.org](http://www.cityofmemory.org)), for instance, allows users to post stories about their lives, experiences, and recollections onto a street-level map of New York City. In aggregate the site becomes a layering of memories and a visual representation of a city where people travel carrying their own mental maps, interconnected but distinct, of places and their meaning. The Google-sponsored site *Historypin* ([www.historypin](http://www.historypin)).

com) likewise invites visitors to post images and vignettes linked to particular points on the map. Other sites enable the public's perspectives to stand side-by-side with the contributions of specialists. *PhilaPlace* ([www.philaplace.org](http://www.philaplace.org)) brought together accounts of two Philadelphia neighborhoods gathered by historians, ethnographers, and folklorists, but also enabled visitors to upload their own stories, images, and videos. The Rosenbach Museum's *21st-Century Abe* ([www.21stcenturyabe.org](http://www.21stcenturyabe.org)) marked Lincoln's 200th birthday by displaying and interpreting the museum's Lincoln-related collection online and by inviting artists to contribute their own take on Lincoln's legacy. As well, the site featured a "Found Abe" section where site visitors could post representations of Lincoln that they came across in popular culture. In place of a single historical narrative, then, the Web invites multiple perspectives, sometimes in dialogue, sometimes jostling, with lines of authority blurred.

But the notion that public audiences should be allowed to make—and share—their own meanings is an idea that far transcends the Web. Tom Satwicz and Kris Morrissey call the approach "public curation"—inviting audiences to become active participants, shaping content and offering interpretations. At a basic level, the same notion underlies oral history. Historians can learn from allowing ordinary people to reflect on their own experiences; after all, these people *lived* those experiences. *StoryCorps*, the national interviewing project, takes the same premise but eliminates the historian: everyone has a story to tell and everyone can tell it, without outside questioners guiding the conversation or assigning meanings. Tens of thousands of people across the country have entered the *StoryCorps* mobile recording booths and simply talked—father to son, grandparent to granddaughter, friend to friend. All the recordings are archived at the Library of Congress, with highlights broadcast weekly on National Public Radio. To *StoryCorps*, the personal voice can stand alone without expert validation.

Driven by the same desire to showcase public perspectives, several museums have experimented with allowing constituents to take on interpretive authority in their galleries. These efforts can be simple or complex. Sometimes these community-curated initiatives are sidebars to larger exhibitions. Almost every gallery in the Levine Museum of the New South, for instance, has comment boards full of Post-it notes scribbled on by visitors. When the Levine made an exhibition exploring the touchy issue of new immigrants to Charlotte (*Changing Places: From Black and White to Technicolor*), it included a video talk-back booth in which visitors could record their thoughts on the issues. The New-York Historical Society did the same for its *Slavery in New York* exhibition. When the Oakland Museum of California faced the challenge of summarizing the turbulent years 1960-1975 for its exhibition surveying state history, it decided instead to showcase multiple public perspectives. It invited two dozen Californians to create memory boxes documenting their experiences of that time. First-person memories of serving in Vietnam or confronting prejudice because of an interracial marriage are accompanied by artifacts from the guest curators' own lives. When the Oakland Museum mounted the traveling exhibition *Birth of the Cool*:

*California Art, Design, and Culture at Midcentury*, it created a companion exhibition in the adjacent gallery—*Cool Remixed*—that explored what the term "cool" means from the perspectives of Oakland teenagers today. The Brooklyn Historical Society has devoted an entire gallery to its *Public Perspectives* exhibition series. Brooklynites apply and get the chance to mount exhibitions on their own. Topics have ranged from Chinese immigration to gentrification and affordable housing. In a host of ways, then, museums are exploring how abandoning the omniscient expert voice can encourage personal engagement and bring alternate viewpoints into the gallery.

The idea of showcasing personal perspectives has likewise driven the work of artists who have engaged history museums. Fred Wilson's seminal 1992 exhibition at the Maryland Historical Society, *Mining the Museum*, challenged the unstated assumptions underlying traditional museum practice. Slave shackles and fine silver goblets take on different meanings when displayed side by side under the terse label "Metalwork." Wilson demonstrated that museums are not neutral authorities but complicit in a host of tangled power relations. In the last several decades, other artists, too, have explored the institutional authority of museums—sometimes lamenting, sometimes lampooning the illusion of objective curatorial interpretation. The Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles offers a deadpan take on a surreal world of centuries-old scientific interpretation while simultaneously demonstrating the power of the nineteenth-century cabinets of curiosity that showcased these scientific "findings." The Rosenbach Museum received an unsettling new interpretation of its bibliophile namesakes when it invited artist/graphic novelist Ben Katchor to create a musical theater piece about them, *The Rosenbach Company: A Tragicomedy*. In conjunction with the American Philosophical

Terry Carroll, Courtesy of Oakland Museum of California



## Native Californians

and museum staff worked together to select and install California baskets from the Oakland Museum of California collections.



Society's exhibition *Undaunted: Five American Explorers, 1760-2007*, the venerable museum (founded in 1794) invited contemporary artists to give their takes on the theme of exploration. Brett Keyser created a performance piece in which, wearing a fur cap, he led audience members on a series of fourteen role-playing "performance expeditions" on the grounds of the Independence National Historical Park, accompanied by his own "expedition artist" who documented the proceedings.

## Lessons—and Questions

This proliferation of projects suggests that public curation offers creative new directions for museums. While user-generated content certainly makes sense on the Web, these examples also show that the impulse extends into exhibits, public programs, and performance media. Public curation is not about technology; it's a new way of looking at your museum and your audiences.

But how new is it really? One theme that emerges in discussing these case studies is that the question of "letting go" has roots. For reasons that long predate and far transcend Wikipedia, museums have been wrestling with the benefits and consequences of de-centering expertise. The current trend is in part a legacy of the New Social History of the 1960s and its interest in telling history "from the bottom up." Having worked for a generation to tell stories that de-center elites, museums now are de-centering elite storytellers, too. The anti-authoritarian bent may be as well a legacy of the culture wars of the 1990s. The fierce backlash against "revisionist" historical interpretations in the Smithsonian's *The West as America* and in the original *Enola Gay* exhibition may have made museums more eager to show that interpretive authority was in the hands of their constituents, not just their curators. Whatever the contributing causes, within a few years of each other in early 1990s, Michael Frisch wrote about oral history and shared

authority, John Kuo Wei Tchen envisioned The Museum of Chinatown History Museum as "a dialogic museum," and Fred Wilson opened *Mining the Museum*.

In looking for explanations for the turn to visitor-generated content, we must also consider more recent changes in realms beyond the museum world. The country's growing ethnic diversity and its economic crises have pushed museum leaders to recognize that the field's traditional business models need to be revamped. Instead of taking public support for granted, museums are desperate to prove their worth to their communities, a stance that makes them more receptive to outside partners, voices, and interpretations.

Even with these precedents and influences, though, mu-

seums clearly are only just beginning to understand the implications of sharing authority. One unsettling question is rarely stated but underlies much anxiety surrounding the idea of letting go. If we invite visitors to take charge of historical interpretation, do we still need history museum workers? What about all those skills (and the professional standing) that we've worked so hard to accumulate? Here the case studies point to a surprising—and, perhaps, reassuring—continuity. Letting go does not mean chaotic free-for-all. The most successful public curation projects invite visitors to work within, not beyond, boundaries. Whether online, on the streets, in the galleries, or in a recording booth, audiences express themselves more creatively and confidently if operating within constraints. *StoryCorps* conversations are a flat forty minutes; the highlights broadcast on NPR are beautifully crafted three-minute mini-dramas. The *City of Memory* story map melds unedited anecdotes posted



## The Rosenbach Museum & Library's

21st-Century Abe ([www.21stcenturyabe.org](http://www.21stcenturyabe.org)) invited both artists and online users to reflect on Lincoln's legacy. The project is archived at [www.21stcenturyabe.org](http://www.21stcenturyabe.org).

by visitors with stories edited by professionals. The site's co-founder, City Lore director Steve Zeitlin, reflects that site visitors need to know readily the answers to two questions—not only "Where is my story?" but also "Where are the best stories?" "Our overarching goal," Zeitlin reflects, "[is] to be inclusive and participatory but not at the expense



## Public Perspectives

*Top:* Photographer and curator Delphine Fawundu-Buford (center) speaks with Tivoli building residents at the opening of *Tivoli: A Place We Call Home*, an exhibition that opened in 2010 in the Brooklyn Historical Society's Public Perspectives Gallery.

*Inset:* Opening of the *Public Perspectives* exhibition, *Tivoli: A Place We Call Home*, at the Brooklyn Historical Society.



Todd Fiero

of creating an artful, beautiful site and a rich, engaging experience for visitors." *HistoryPin* likewise has one tab for "What's new on Historypin" and another that says "Tour the best content." At the Oakland Museum, the teenagers' visions came through in *Cool Remixed* because they worked closely with museum designers, who listened, experimented, and enabled. In the museum's California history survey, the 1960s memory boxes had fixed dimensions. And, of course, the museum didn't invite just *anyone* who lived through the 1960s to participate but chose people with particularly rich viewpoints that, the curators felt, would resonate with visitors. Anyone could contribute to the video talk-back booths at the Levine Museum of the New South and the New-York Historical Society, but only engaging excerpts were edited and shown and made available to subsequent visitors. Even the Post-it boards at the Levine get culled.

It may seem paradoxical, but limits—word counts, canvas boundaries, time limits—encourage free-form work. The

amount and quality of creative participation increases when visitors are guided by smart question prompts, stencils, or menus of choices.

Making these experiences work requires real talent on the part of the museum. When a museum or site embraces public participation, staff members do not hand over the keys to the building and walk away. Overall, public curation demands *more*, not less, from history museums and their expert staffs.

To a great extent, success depends on that most traditional kind of museum expertise—what, in the broadest sense, we can call curating: choosing topics, identifying stories, devising delivery systems, editing. For starters, museums still very much need deep content knowledge. Visitors trust museums in part because they supply information that has been



Delphine Fawundu-Buford (left), photographer and curator of the exhibit, *Tivoli: A Place We Call Home*, speaks with a fellow guest at the exhibit opening.

researched and vetted. Critics of visitor-generated content worry that galleries will get filled with inaccurate information and wrongheaded interpretations. Indeed, audiences count on museums for rich interpretations and fresh, accurate information and we don't want to jeopardize that trust.

Public curation, however, could actually be an opportunity to ground that faith more firmly in what museums really do with history. As David Thelen and Roy Rosenzweig documented in their 1990s survey of popular attitudes toward history, visitors like museums in part because they offer interpretations that are not just accurate but unmediated. Many visitors seem to think that museums just show them objects and let audiences make sense of them on their own. In truth, of course, creating an exhibition involves nothing *but* making mediations—from selecting topics to choosing objects to lighting and labeling. As Ken Yellis points out, “the public takes what museums mean to offer in a contingent, speculative, or provocative spirit with a terrifying—and humbling—literal-mindedness.” Perhaps involving visitors in constructing interpretations can help them better understand how museums approach the past. “We make choices, present arguments,” James Gardner writes, “just like our colleagues elsewhere in the profession.”<sup>1</sup>

In this sense, embracing public curation could enable museums to convey a more accurate sense of how history works. To do so, museum professionals will need to supplement command of historical content with expertise at interpreting, facilitating, engaging, listening, and learning with their visitors. Public curation does not mean presenting visitors with a mess of objects or a mass of historical content. Museums need to lay the groundwork to enable visitors to participate successfully. That means identifying multiple pathways through the content; building bridges that visitors can cross between the stories from the past and their own experiences; and offering tools visitors can use to make new discoveries, cut new pathways, and build new bridges. Some visitors may

want a detailed map of the historical terrain; some may want their pathways pre-paved; others will say, “Hand me an ax,” and charge forth.

What changes, perhaps, is not the need for experts but our attitude toward expertise. As exhibition designer Kathy McLean suggests, museums need to broaden their definition of what “expertise” entails: considerable skills are needed to encourage and enable visitors to join in making meanings. What the museum lets go of is not skills and knowledge but the assumption that the museum has the last word on historical interpretation. The museum instead is trying to prime the pump of interpretations, hoping that they will keep flowing without the museum having to do all the heavy work, generating ideas that the museum would never have come to on its own. This scenario involves letting go of the notion (usually illusory in any case) that one can or should control all outcomes in the museum. The staff become adept at living with, even relishing, uncertainty and unpredictability.

To say that the expertise of museum workers remains essential, though, is not to minimize the extent to which public curation challenges the ways in which museums traditionally have operated. For starters, our usual “collect, preserve, and interpret” missions are not enough to encompass this work. Moreover, the very idea of inviting unpredictability challenges the field's preoccupation over the last several decades with best practices. How can one mandate professional processes and procedures when one doesn't have control of the process? Even at institutions where the move to introduce new voices begins with considerable support, the efforts frequently butt against institutional expectations about interpretation, audience, and professional polish. Even the usual evaluation criteria and methods do not apply to public curation. If one shifts from declarative takeaway messages and invites visitors to contribute new ideas and fresh conversations, how does one measure success?

Letting go brings uncertainties, but it may yield a bounty in return for museums. If we let visitors pursue new directions, they may take us to areas of fresh discovery that revitalize our work. As well, by trusting our audiences, we may earn their deeper loyalties. Constituents will appreciate the chance to explore with skilled partners who know not only how to lecture but to listen, not only how to teach but to learn, not only how to present but to receive. ©

Benjamin Filene is Director of Public History at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Portions of this article draw from *Letting Go? Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*, edited by Filene, Bill Adair, and Laura Koloski and published in 2011 by The Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, distributed by Left Coast Press. Filene thanks his co-editors and the book's other contributors for their insights and contributions to this article. Benjamin can be reached at [bpfilene@uncg.edu](mailto:bpfilene@uncg.edu).

<sup>1</sup> Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Ken Yellis, “Cueing the Visitor: The Museum Theater and the Visitor Performance,” *Curator* 53 (January 2010): 98; James B. Gardner, “Contested Terrain: History, Museums, and the Public,” *The Public Historian* 26 (Fall 2004): 13.